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The GOLDEN GALLEON

LUCAS MALET

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LUCAS MALET

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She set up the little ship as on an altar thus

THE GOLDEN GALLEON

BY

LUCAS MALET
(MRS. MARY ST. LEGER HARRISON)
Author of "Sir Richard Calmady"

ILLUSTRATED IN COLOR
By C. E. BROCK

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
NEW YORK
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MARIE DE NESSELRODE.

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CHAPTER I

MISS MIRANDA POVEY got out of bed, put on her knitted slippers, and, moving across to the window, pulled up the blind. Sunrise painted the unlovely backs of the neighbouring houses with a delicate rose-orange glow. Above the further roofs and chimney-pots, a shell-pink church spire cut into the azure sky. Round it a flight of pigeons circled, turning, as the light took them, from grey to rose and back again to grey. Thin, blue mist hung in the spaces of shadow; and through it up the narrow backyard immediately below, Marquis, the black and white tom-cat, trotted homeward, his ears flattened, his neck outstretched, his head, tail, and body

moving in a straight line low along the ground. He had had a night out, a night of love, song, and battle, after the unregenerate manner of his kind. Now he sloped home, proposing to spend a day of well-earned repose, to be generously fed and much waited upon.

Miss Miranda lingered watching the returning, but quite unrepentant prodigal and the broadening reflections of the sunrise. The magic colours held her fancy captive with an emotion of delighted thankfulness—for it was a great privilege surely to witness such rare beauty of newborn day in this ignoble North-East London outlook! But just then the Chidcock's cook-general, Gladys Em'ly by name—a plump, red-headed, and generally over-blown young person—came out into the backyard next door. Her all-round kitchen apron, held hammock fash-

ion, was loaded with floor and hearth-rugs which she dumped down on the dark, earthy gravel. Then, her feet—in down-at-heel slippers—planted firmly far apart, she proceeded to beat the rugs. Her coarsely opulent figure, clad in a stringy blue cotton gown, swung loosely from the hips and her bare muscular red arms described two-thirds of a circle as she swished the rugs against one of the posts carrying the clothes-line, raising a cloud of dust.

With the advent of Gladys Em'ly, the sunrise colours seemed to Miss Miranda to lose something of their magic quality, and grow towards the dingy common-place of common-day. Therefore she withdrew from the window, and going across to the bedside, took a bunch of keys from beneath the bolster. The glory of the new-born day had not altogether

ceased to hold her imagination yet, and she wanted to practise certain mystic rites while the joy of it was still present to her.

She was a little pony-built woman, light and quick of movement, pleasant-faced, her eyes bright brown, her skin smooth and sallow. Her pretty brown hair, defiant of the restraining brush, lay on her forehead, either side the parting, in small fluffy curls. Her eyebrows were straight and black; and a shade of dusky down showed, not unbecomingly, on her upper lip. In her plain long-cloth night-dress, hanging straight and sack-like to the floor, her white-robed person presented a quaintly cylindrical effect. But of this, intent on what she was about to do, Miss Miranda was quite ignorant. Crossing the room again, standing on tip-toe, she unlocked the upper drawer of a tall chest of drawers; and from thence

took a square box, covered in blue silk plush. This, reaching up, she carefully —exactly observing angle and central position—placed upon the top of the chest, as upon an altar. Then she backed away again, her hands folded high upon the bosom of her night-dress, smiling to herself in happy expectation, relishing, child-like, the excitement of a self-imposed penance of delay.

When, at last, Miss Miranda permitted herself to untie the encircling ribbon and raise the lid, the four sides of the box fell back, forming a blue plush platform; upon which, as upon the smooth waters of some deep-hued tropic sea, rode a silver-gilt, four-inch, three-masted ship. Stern and stem it was piled up castle fashion. All its gilded sails were set. Three rows of mimic port-holes ranged along either side of the hull. An enamelled pen-

non, living crimson as a splash of newly shed blood, flew from the main-mast head. Once the rigging, bulwarks, tiny deck-houses and cannon had been perfect and complete; but that was the best part of three centuries ago when it emerged from the Dutch silversmith workshop. Now it bore many traces of damage. The sails were dented, portions of the fittings broken away and lost. Still the little ship made a gallant show in the dingy London back-bedroom, the costly substance and delicate workmanship of it offering arresting contrast to the genteel poverty of its surroundings—to the worn patched square of Brussels carpet, the more or less decrepit furniture, the faded red window curtains and valances of the box bed. In this contrast Miss Miranda found abiding pleasure, since it went to satisfy her natural yearning for rich and beauti-

ful things, both material and moral. And so it came about that each morning when she rose, each night when she went very tired to bed, conscious of half-guilty joy as one who commits an act of secret self-indulgence, she set up the little ship, as on an altar, thus.

Long ago it had been some wealthy child's cherished toy, and Miranda Povey was nearly fifty. Yet for a short happy space twice daily she allowed herself to look at it, tenderly finger and play with it, offering it innocent worship as to a thing sacred and apart.

Miss Miranda had no quarrel with destiny, being a reasonable and humble-minded person with but a modest opinion of her own importance and deserts. Circumstances, she knew, might be far harsher than they actually were, for the sight of sickness and poverty were very fa-

miliar to her. Most people, indeed, in her experience, were either sick or poor, too often both. Nevertheless, in these brief playtimes, stolen from the round of domestic work, of small economies, anxieties, duties, which made up her daily record, week in and week out, she had come to regard the little ship in a spirit of mystic devotion, as symbol and, in a sense, exponent of all the inarticulate desires of her womanhood, of all the fond hopes and imaginings of her fifty years of living—hopes and imaginings which for the main part had rather conspicuously failed to come true.

The manner of the silver-gilt ship coming into Miss Miranda's possession was as follows.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Willy Evans left them, the Miss Poveys—aunt and niece—without even consulting their tenant and next-door neighbour, Mr. Chidcock, resolved they would never take another lodger. Miss Povey declared she "began to feel her age and doubted whether she really had the spirit to cope with a stranger." In this statement Miss Miranda detected a distinct lapse from veracity, her aunt being happily in excellent health. Yet she accepted the statement with grateful alacrity. She admired the elder lady's delicacy and resource in advancing a personal reason, since clearly that admitted of no reply.

"Of course, Aunt, dear, it's only proper

you should consider your strength first," she said. "And having anybody in the house does mean a lot of extra work and responsibility. And then we might be unfortunate and get somebody who hadn't a nice disposition; and once here we might have great difficulty to turn them out. It's far wiser not to run the chance of any disagreeable of that sort. Why, it'll be quite a holiday to be alone for us both. I shall have time to do the flower gardening in the yard we've so often spoken about!"

This with cheerful mendacity. For, in point of fact, both ladies were equally willing to avoid saying plainly why it was so impossible that Willy Evans should have a successor.

After their own simple fashion, the two Miss Poveys were confirmed idealists. At the same time they were ex-

tremely reticent, subscribing resolutely to a code of good manners very much their own. It followed that of quite a number of subjects, rarely absent from their thoughts, they never spoke to one another, even when the curtains were drawn, the back and front doors bolted, and Mrs. Shoppen, the charwoman, had finished cleaning up and gone home. Just in proportion as persons trust one another can they afford to be silent. And so now, the real reason why they could not make up their minds to take another lodger went to join that large company of things rarely, absent from their thoughts yet never spoken of.

Yet the real reason was a very simple and human one. Willy had lodged with them for nearly six years, during which time they had watched him develop from a nervous, impulsive, lanky boy, perpetu-

ally growing out of the sleeves of his jackets and legs of his trousers, into a smart, self-confident, fine-drawn young fellow, black-haired, bright-eyed, bright-coloured, ready in speech, quick in thought, altogether-up-to-date and effective. He called them Other Auntie and Aunty My respectively. On occasions, such as birthdays, starting for or returning from a holiday, he kissed them. He was only a clerk in a coal merchant's office, but the Miss Poveys believed him competent to rule empires. In his secret soul Willy Evans fully endorsed that belief. But "the world knows little of its greatest men," which, as he reflected, is unfortunate—specially, of course, for the world—though it might help to explain the otherwise incomprehensible fact that no vacant imperial throne had, as yet, presented itself either at his employer's

office in the City or at Miss Poveys'—No. 4, Talavera Crescent, Hoxton, N.E.—soliciting his immediate acceptance and occupation. And it was a sub-conscious hope that thrones might prove more intelligently cognisant of his gifted existence elsewhere which had dictated his change of residence.

He felt going, for he was fond of his landladies; and still fonder of the unstinted admiration they bestowed on him. Only that which in his case amounted to an agreeably touching and quite fugitive heartache, in theirs amounted to something trenching on positive disaster. With his going sunlight faded out of the Miss Poveys' sky. Perpetual twilight held it. Willy's presence had kept them in a continual flutter of gentle excitement, had warmed, elated, dazzled them, had given them something definite to live for. They

felt pitifully lonely, and the future looked pitifully blank without him, an interminable vista of drab-coloured featureless days. Yet, being idealists, they refused illusion. They preferred twilight, however mournful, to the rigging up of any mock sun. In other words, they preferred dullness and loneliness to the entertainment of some other youth who would sit in Willy's place at table; occupy his bedroom on the second floor front; and possibly even aspire to play the American organ in the sitting-room, on those breathless summer evenings when the tumult of the traffic was sufficiently stilled for the windows to stand open on to the narrow balcony, off the iron railings and tin-roofing off which the green paint blistered and scaled so pertinaciously.

Willy had a fruity tenor. He sang

They listened hypnotised and enchanted

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hymns with catchy, sentimental tunes and unctuous words to them, suggestive of an astonishingly intimate acquaintance with the tastes and tempers of the Deity. But the Miss Poveys were quite unsuspicious of irreverence. They listened hypnotised and enchanted, absolutely unaware, in their virtuous innocence, of any possible blending of earthly with heavenly love. Never, for an instant, did it occur to them that the appeal of these spiritual duties might be somewhat erotic. To the pure all things are pure; and the Miss Poveys unquestionably may be numbered with the elect in this matter. Whether Willy Evans was as securely on the high road of salvation—though very certainly thinking himself so—remains an arguable quantity. He threw into his singing all the sensuous fervour of the Welsh temperament. His eyes were suffused by

tears, his voice sobbed in his throat. One half of his consciousness palpitated with deliciously enervating religious emotion; while the other half was actively engaged, scheming—as always, scheming—in respect of his own worldly advancement. For Willy Evans meant to arrive. There was no shadow of doubt about that. He meant to emerge and generally stagger humanity; though whether as agitator, speculator, journalist, preacher, or sportsman—in the very elastic modern acceptation of that term—he was at present undecided.

But meanwhile, for the Miss Poveys, the young man's going entailed a twilight of the pocket as well as of the heart. Their means were slender. The elder lady possessed an annuity of forty-five pounds a year. The younger drew the interest of about six hundred, invested in

Consols—the capital she could not touch. Jointly they owned the leasehold of two houses in Talavera Crescent. In one of these houses they lived. The other was let to Mr. Samuel Chidcock, a retired oil-and-colourman of high Tory views and aggressive respectability. The leases had about sixteen years yet to run. Then, the site being increasingly valuable, the shabby little crescent—looking for all the world, from the street, like a strip of soiled and dusty painted cardboard set up on edge, without discernible roof, back, or sides to it—the puddle patched private road, half-moon of ragged turf, row of decayed, stunted elm-trees, and iron railings shutting it off from the roaring tram-swept thoroughfare, would be demolished and its inhabitants turned adrift. These being the Miss Poveys' sole sources of income, it followed that Willy's fif-

teen-and-six, board-residence, constituted a weekly incoming by no means to be despised. Yet they relinquished it without flinching, thereby confessing the sincerity of their idealism, and proving themselves very much less nearly related to the sensible and thrifty Children of this World than to the reprehensively improvident Children of Light.

Evans left Talavera Crescent at the end of the June quarter; and for the ensuing three months the Miss Poveys saw next to nothing of him. They were ingenious in excuses for his non-appearance, each fearing the other might feel neglected or hurt. Miss Povey trusted he was "having a fine long holiday—with his confinement to the office and hard work he needed it. It was nice to think, what with bicycles and cheap excursions,

how easy it was, now, for young people to get about."

Miss Miranda's theory embraced more ambitious horizons. She was sure he only stayed away till he had some great good news to bring them.

"That's just like Willy," she declared bravely. "He's just waiting till he's something splendid to tell us. He means to give us a lovely surprise. You'll see we shall be finding his portrait in the picture papers very soon; and then shan't we both be proud!"

All of which came true; but with a difference, life having ironical turns to it.

As the autumn advanced and the days shortened the young man's visits became less infrequent. Yet, truth to tell, his appearance betokened no startling betterment either social or financial. He was thinner. Hard lines showed at the cor-

ners of his mouth and furrowed his forehead, while his manner was alternately superfluously jaunty and superfluously glum. He was preoccupied, irritable. In his face the red came and went feverishly under the brown skin. The Miss Poveys watched him with anxious eyes. Yet, though uncertain in temper, he had never been more affectionate. Often after kissing them—a little ceremony never now omitted—he would throw back his head, shake himself in his quick, eager way, and stretch as though in relief from the weight of some actual physical burden, while saying—

"Yes, it's awfully sweet to be back in the dear little old place along with you both, Aunties. It's all just the same, as restful and homely as ever. I doubt if I shall ever be as comfortable anywhere else. Not that I am coming back,

though," he added hastily. "You dear things make a fellow too cosy. I might grow soft, and that won't do. I can't afford to grow soft. There's work to be done—work which taxes all a man's manliness and ability. The softer side has to be sacrificed. These are pushing times, and I am going to push with the best."

Whereat Miss Miranda smiled and nodded a happy "I told you so" to Miss Povey.

"Yes, we do count on your taking up a fine position, Willy, dear," the latter said. Miranda and I often talk about your future. We feel you are intended for great things. But then we know your true worth. When others know it there can be no question but that something handsome will be offered you."

"Don't be afraid; they're going to

know my worth—going to know more about it than will quite suit some of them, perhaps," he replied, becoming Byronic and gloomy. "Why, this calls itself a free country, for instance. In my opinion it's a country of slave-driving, blood-sucking aristocrats and millionaires, who live in vicious luxury at the expense of the working man. And I am prepared to tell them so."

He drooped, as one exhausted by tremendous effort.

"I've been going through a lot," he said. "I've learnt, and read, and thought no end lately."

Again the two ladies nodded to one another. This was what he had been doing then! They regarded him with loving, reverent admiration. They were deeply moved.

"Yes, I've read and learnt a lot," he

continued. "And it's shaken all the boyish nonsense out of me. It's made me a stern, hard man."

"Dear Willy," Miss Miranda murmured under her breath.

"It has, Auntie My," he returned. "I have been into all the social and political problems of the day, and I've formed my own opinions on them. It just comes to this—the present state of affairs has to cease. The profits for the workers, the land for the people—those are my watchwords, that's what I preach. No more unemployment, no more starvation wages, no more infernal impertinence of so-called charity. All that's over. It's got to go. No more titles, either; no more capitalists, and no more paupers. For the rich man makes the poor man. Where can riches come from but out of somebody else's pocket. Isn't that as clear as

daylight? Property is theft; therefore property must be taxed out of existence. It must cease to be the privilege of the few. It must be evenly distributed and compelled to circulate. Oh! I have got a few home-truths ready for them! I'm prepared to hit straight out from the shoulder. Not arguments; but just facts, unanswerable facts—that's the way to floor them. So far the laws of this country have been made by the rich to protect the rich; but, thanks to education and co-operation, the working man is awake now. He begins to feel his power. He has learnt that combination is strength. He is not going to be bamboozled any more by a handful of degenerate titled and liveried criminals. He is beginning to assert himself and claim his own, and refuse to be used as a door-mat for pampered courtiers to wipe their boots upon. He's

had enough of that; centuries, thousands of years of it. He knows the length of the foot inside those boots; and knows it's not as long as his own, or as strong as his own, or as honest as his own. He knows it is a cloven foot. Yes, a cloven foot, a hoof —and he's not going to have that hoof set its ugly mark upon his life or the lives of his wives and his little ones any more. Yes —it's war, war to the knife, red war, a war of extermination in which all means are fair and justifiable as between the masses and the classes. And I—I throw in my lot, just for all I'm worth, body and brains, with the masses."

This given forth, in an ascending scale of passionate declamation, the young voice throbbing through the small, shabby-genteel front sitting-room, electrified that gentle audience of two. Much of it was frankly alarming, much of it entirely

bewildering, not a little of it wholly incomprehensible; but this increased rathan than lessened the Miss Poveys' admiration. They thought of the Bible, of passages in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel, in Revelations. There was indeed, something apocalyptic to them, and as the thunders of Sinai, in this eloquent advocacy and indictment. In their simplicity they did not detect sophisms, or attempt to check misstatements. One half of it all was true, to their knowledge. For didn't want and unemployment swarm in the acres of mean streets and slummy courts to right, and left, and back, of Talavera Crescent? Therefore wasn't it only too probable, since he so splendidly said it, that the other half was true also—that all great wealth was ill-gotten, that the whole aristocracy, lock, stock and barrel, was wicked? The fiery picture of poverty ex-

punged and wrongs righted appealed to their native idealism. They were amazed, frightened, yet exalted by the breath of great hopes and great promises which seemed to touch them. They thought of wonderful evenings which, when they were better off, they had ocasionally spent at the theatre; of plays, rich in catastrophe, wherein poetic justice was meted out with no sparing hand to virtuous hero and black-hearted villain. But such evenings and the emotion produced by them was not a patch upon the present experience.

And so with tearful eyes and tremulous lips they acclaimed their own dear Willy Evans a greater genius than ever. In him they had found not only a son, but a prophet and teacher. And, in their innocence, felt humbled by their own good fortune, unworthy of the immense honor

accorded them in having been this noble young man's landladies, and still being his friends and confidantes.

This was what he had been about, then, during those months in which they had rarely seen him—preparing himself for the great work as a political leader! And either blushed, remembering her sense of neglect, of slight, at his non-coming. And, then, since, like all true women they must needs give a private and personal turn to every—however abstract or public—matter, they remembered with relief that forfeited fifteen-and-six a week, board-residence. For if, as this beloved social evangelist assured them, property was indeed theft, straightened circumstances clearly constituted not a curse—as so many ignorant persons erroneously suppose—but a blessing.

So they were thankful, very thankful. And then something quite unexpected happened.

CHAPTER III

ONE evening late in December Miss Miranda was alone in the house with Marquis, the cat. Her aunt had gone next door to sit with Mrs. Chidcock, who, when doing her week-end shopping on the previous Saturday, had had the misfortune to tread on a banana skin and fall heavily, bruising the veins of her left leg. The Miss Poveys, in the kindness of their hearts, took it in turns to spend an hour or two with the invalid daily, thus setting Mr. Chidcock free to go for a stroll, to look at the papers and discuss the affairs of the nation at the local Conservative Club. Long years of matrimony had, perhaps unjustly, given Mr. Chidcock a but mean opinion of the female in-

tellect. He was a pompous, irascibe, stout little man, with a sanguine complexion and fiery blue eye, who now that his energies no longer found an outlet in the excitements of the oil-and-colour business, was liable to behave not precisely with the mansuetude of a ministering spirit to his disabled wife.

All day fog had hung over North-East London. About seven o'clock it came down, black, raw, and stifling, into the streets, greatly to the discomfort of foot-passengers and dislocation of traffic. A hoarse babel of sound went up from the great thoroughfare, to which the clanging electric bells of the trams contributed an aggressively warning note. Miss Miranda made a hasty tour of the house, wishing to assure herself all windows were shut; and the cat followed her. An impish humour had seized on that experi-

enced and usually dignified animal. For cause unknown it frolicked and pranced like the veriest kitten—galloped, its paws thudding over the thin carpets and making the treads of the stairs creak. If Miss Miranda paused it fawned upon her, rearing itself upon its hind legs and trying to force its hard, adder-shaped head into her hand; or, flinging itself down on the floor, all four paws in air, rolled and twisted its lithe, piebald body, making strange little chirruping noises in its throat. She was at once amused and put about by these gyrations, since they took on an eerie character in the close, empty rooms, seen in the dull light which came at queer angles through the half-open doors from the gas-jets in the entry and on the staircase landings.

The oppression of the fog, the solitude, the diabolic demeanour of the cat, com-

bined to make Miss Miranda slightly nervous. Then a summons from the front-door knocker echoed through the house. Miss Miranda ran downstairs, with her heart, as the saying is, in her mouth. She waited a minute in the entry to steady herself; but again the knocker went. She opened the door a few inches, against the chain, and the fog streamed past her chill and sulphurous.

"Let me in! let me in!" a man said. His mouth was evidently pressed close against the opening, while his fingers grasped the edge of the door, pressing it back, so that the chain grew taut and the ball jammed in the bolt-casing.

"It's me, me, Willy Evans—don't you hear? Let me in!" he repeated.

"Yes, yes," Miss Miranda answered. But she was flurried. It did not sound like Willy's voice somehow. It was so

Evans stumbled into the entry

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breathless, so, as it seemed to her, frightened. "Only you must move your hand away, please, or I cannot take the chain down."

"Why the devil do you keep the chain up?" the voice snapped back.

Miss Miranda trembled from head to foot. For surely it could not be Willy, their own dear, clean-mouthed, splendid Willy, who spoke so vulgarly as that? She hesitated a moment. On the landing above the cat mewed and galloped.

"Oh! let me in, Auntie My!" the voice implored, with a change of tone, almost tearfully.

Then putting forth all her strength Miss Miranda forced the ball out of the bolt-casing and Evans stumbled into the entry, slamming the door to behind him. His bowler hat was tipped forward over his eyes and his coat-collar turned up. He

carried a tan leather bag, which appeared to be heavy. As he set it down on the floor things inside it chinked. He stood still, his breath coming short with a click in his throat. Then he said—

"Forgive me, Auntie My. I'm ever so sorry if I've given you a fright."

He threw back the fronts of his overcoat, took off his hat. Miss Miranda saw that his face was drawn and white, and that drops of sweat stood on his forehead. Her alarm altered in character.

"Oh! Willy, what has happened? You have not had an accident? My dear, are you hurt?"

The young man was recovering his self-control.

"No, no, no," he said. "But I am nearly choked with the fog; that's all. It's as black as pitch. I lost the way three times coming over from my place. I had

to walk. All the 'busses are held up. I wasn't sure if I'd hit the right house, after all, till I heard you speak. And you see I was carrying this"—he poked the bag with the toe of his boot. "I was followed —one runs across all sorts of undesirables in a fog—and I was afraid the bag might be snatched. I didn't want a tussle with some hooligan crowd. I shouldn't have had a chance. Like a silly I brought no stick. And then—then, Auntie My," he laughed apologetically, "I know it was ridiculous, but it gave me a turn, somehow, the way you seemed to want to keep me out."

"Oh! how can you? how can you?" Miss Miranda expostulated, cut to the quick. She wished Marquis would leave off crying so and galloping in the empty rooms overhead. "As if I should ever want to keep you out, Willy! You

shouldn't say such things, even in fun. There is nothing, nothing in the world, which our means permitted, Aunt and I would not do for you that you asked."

He bent down and kissed her cheek.

"Yes, I do know, and that's just why, when I couldn't get in, I felt so upset; because I've come on purpose to ask you to do something for me. You can do something that will be no end of a help. So don't be cross with me any more, Auntie My. Forgive me, and say you'll help."

His arm slipped coaxingly round her waist. Again he bent down and kissed her cheek. And Miss Miranda's heart grew very soft. For genius, specially in the form of a fluent tenderly cajoling young man, can be forgiven much.

"It's a secret," he went on jauntily, "a cunning little secret just between us three. And, by the way, where's Other Aunt?"

"She's out. She will be disappointed to miss you. But she's gone round to sit with poor Mrs. Chidcock."

The young man rather hastily picked up the bag.

"And of course old Chiddy will bring her home—that's a nuisance."

He paused, staring hard at Miss Miranda without apparently seeing her.

"Look here, Auntie My, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go up to my old room and talk over my business there. I don't care to risk the chance of old Chiddy poking his fossilised old nose into my affairs and asking questions and giving advice. He can't get over my having taken a strong, independent line of my own on public questions, and he's been downright nasty to me lately on the few occasions when we've happened to meet. If he could get the chance to do me some

dirty trick I believe he would jump at it."

"I hope not," Miss Miranda said earnestly.

"Ah, but he would," the young man insisted. "He has all the spitefulness of those who know the future is against them. So let us go to my room, in case he should come round with Other Aunt. I'll wait there till he has gone, and you needn't say anything about me. But—but, Auntie My," he broke out sharply, "what's that? I thought we were alone. Who on earth's making that row up above?"

"Only Marquis," Miss Miranda answered. "I don't know what possesses the cat to-night. He goes on like a regular mad thing."

The young man wiped his face with his handkerchief.

"It gave me a start," he said irritably.

"I'm tired. I was kept up late last night."

With an effort he recovered his temper.

"All right, Auntie; you lead on with my hat and coat—we cover our tracks so as to put the ancient Chiddycocks off the scent—and I follow with the baggage."

As they passed the open door of the dark drawing-room, the cat bounded out with a miaul, and vanished up the stairs in front of them—an uncanny, piebald, chirruping streak. Evans made use of an expression which Miss Miranda did her best not to hear. It distressed her. He used not to talk like that. She hurried, with short, trotting steps, a busy little black-clothed figure, into the bedroom and lighted the gas.

The atmosphere was thick and close—that of a London room which has been vacant and fireless, and of which the fur-

niture and hangings have seen long usage. The aspect of it was somewhat bare and comfortless in the sickly flickering gas-light. A dusting-sheet covered the mattress of the half-tester bed, at the foot of which stood a good-sized Pembroke table in walnut wood. Upon this the young man dumped down the bag. Again things inside it chinked. He waited a minute, breathing quickly and wiping his face.

"Bring a chair, Auntie My and sit down," he said. "I want to explain. You see, my crusade against the iniquity of riches and of poverty is at the bottom of this. You can't denounce abuses and champion the cause of the oppressed in this country without suffering persecution."

Miss Miranda's brown eyes smiled. She folded her hands—the skin of them

coarsened and the joints thickened by house-work—contentedly in her black merino lap. It did not occur to her that the young man was pumping up enthusiasm with rather conscious effort. Not a bit of it. When he spoke thus it satisfied her soul as beautiful music might.

"Yes, dear, yes," she commented. "But since you know it to be truth, you will be above letting persecution make you give way?"

"Of course I shall," he said, whipping himself into a rhetorical ferment. "I defy persecution. I glory in it. All the great reformers have been lied about and traduced. That is the seal of their consecration—to encounter hatred and abuse. I am proud, Auntie My, proud and honoured to take my share of ill-usage along with such grand companions."

Miss Miranda crooned to herself,

wordlessly, blissfully. Here was the perfect note sounded again, and how she delighted in it If he would go on talking in that strain she could sit and listen—oh! how gladly—till midnight.

Meanwhile he bent down, unfastening the over-clamps of the mouth of the bag which opened square.

"But you see, in this case persecution takes the form of depriving me of the means of earning a living, and that is rough on me. I knew I must get the sack sooner or later, but I did hope it might be later. I'm not quite prepared for it yet, and it rushes me a bit and makes me nervous. Rumours of my public addresses have got about at the office. One of the fellows there, who I've talked to now and then, thinking he was with us politically, must have turned traitor and peached."

Evans paused a moment, and wiped his forehead uneasily.

"Yes, it does make me nervous," he went on, more to himself as it seemed than to his auditor. "But it was politics, only politics, I'm sure of that. So the long and short of it is, Auntie My, last Saturday the manager sent for me, and paid me the compliment of informing me I was an ignorant, conceited young fool who was playing with fire. He said I should have nobody but myself to thank if I found myself in an awful mess; that he regretted my abilities being turned to dangerous and seditious uses; and that it was his duty to see that pernicious doctrines were not circulated among his clerks. He was responsible as their employer, and he wasn't going to have their minds contaminated, and all that sort of exploded nonsense and grandmotherly tommy-rot.

The young man pulled a frayed red woollen muffler and a pair of old white flannel trousers out of the bag, impatiently, and flung them down on the floor.

"He had the impudence to tell me he'd give me a chance of retaining my post and redeeming my character by holding my tongue and breaking with my political circle, the oily hypocrite. But I shall not hold my tongue. I shall stick to my principles, whatever it costs me to do so. I told him as much, and a lot more besides; and then I turned on my heel and wished him good-morning. Yes, Auntie My, I took my stand on the right of free speech, and of every man to hold what views he pleases. I just let him see the stuff I'm made of, and that the best of my generation are made of. It made him sit up, I promise you. Yes, I must stick to my principles whatever it may cost me.

And it's going to cost me a good deal, Auntie My; for you can't support life, let alone working effectively for a great cause, without dollars at the back of you."

Miss Miranda bowed herself together, clasping her work-worn hands very tightly. Her heart sang a hymn of praise, for a vista of unlooked-for happiness opened out before her.

"But Willy dear, you know this is your home, if you only care to claim it," she said almost shyly. "I speak for Aunt as well as for myself. We have not much, but all we have you are richly welcome to. Here is your room to begin with. Nothing has been altered in it since you left. We felt it belonged to you. And with just a little management we could quite well board you free of all expense, for a time, until you were better off, you know."

Evans was busy taking oddly shaped parcels wrapped in newspaper out of the bag, counting them as he laid them upon the table. He did not answer at once, neither did he look up. At last he said, rather brokenly—

"It's no end sweet of you to make me such an offer, Auntie My. But it's not possible, not possible. I could never respect myself if I sponged on you like that."

"It wouldn't be right if you were just going to live in idleness; but it is quite different, just for a time, so as to set you quite free for your great work, she argued. "And then it's not as though we had any one but our two selves to consider. Aunt and I are at liberty to do what we please with the little we have."

Her tone softened to pleading.

"We have missed you very much. For

ourselves, Willy, we should ask nothing better than to have you back."

Still counting, he took the last of the parcels out of the bag—a shabby, square blue plush box, tied round with faded blue sarcenet ribbon.

"Sixteen, eighteen—yes," he said. "That's the lot."

He dropped the empty bag on to the floor, kicked it aside irritably, and, walking across to the window, stood, his hands in his pockets, staring out at the blackness of the fog. And from the surface of the window-panes his own image stared back at him, the face anxious, lined, pallid, twitching at the corners of the mouth and of the eyelids. A thin, blurred reflection of the familiar room showed as background to that image—the greenish-yellow sanitary paper on the walls and its self-coloured trellis of grape-bunches and

vine-leaves; the dismantled bed; the dressing- chest set back in the angle of the chimney-breast; the old Scotch tallboy where he used to keep his clothes; the worn, red carpet, in which the seams showed like long, pale scars; the Pembroke table covered with queer-shaped greyish-paper white parcels; and beside the table, watching him with loving, patient, wistful eyes, the modest, black-clad figure of the little middle-aged maiden lady. The picture was dingy, yet appealing; and to quick-brained, quick-blooded, sentimental, shifty Willy Evans, suggestive of very much.

"No, it isn't possible—it isn't possible!" he repeated angrily, almost desperately, in half-conscious response to that appeal. "I can't do it They might split on me. I daren't! I've gone too far. I daren't!"

The crash of a collision, followed by

confused cries, shouting, and the piercing shrillness of a police whistle, came from the fog-blind street. Evans started, uttering a sharp ejaculation, and stood, open-mouthed, listening. Then, as the commotion gradually quieted down, he turned away, wiping the perspiration off his face, and came across the room trying to smile, to be jaunty and quite at his ease again. He went so far as to pat Miss Miranda encouragingly on the back, and bending down lightly kissed the little curls on her forehead.

"You're an A1 darling little old guardian angel, and no mistake, Auntie My," he said. "Don't suppose I don't appreciate all your sweetness; for I do, on my life. I'll come in just as often as I can and tell you my news. And when I can, I'll gladly occupy this dear old cabin for a night. But there must be no question

of my staying for good. It's push, push, push, you know, Auntie My. And, as I've told you before, you make a fellow too comfy. I might grow soft."

He sat down at the opposite side of the table and fingered the parcels.

"Now, attention; we've got to talk business," he went on. "I do want your help—want it ever so badly; but, as I'll demonstrate to you, though I've thrown up the office, I'm not altogether destitute yet. Some friends of mine have taken me into partnership. I've been working with them for some little time now, after office hours, at night. It is quite a private concern. We don't advertise, and we have no regular place of business. That's why I look to you and Aunt. I want you to take in part of our stock and warehouse it here for me. We deal in curios, and old silver, and jewellery. But one can't rush

sales. One has to wait and nurse the market if one is to sell to advantage. We only deal with private customers, you see, and I have nowhere to keep the goods at my place."

Unwrapping the newspaper from the largest of the parcels he tossed it on to the floor, and unfolded the tissue paper underneath, disclosing a gold cup set with carbuncles, each holding a heart of dull flame.

Miss Miranda gave a little cry.

"Oh! but Willy, Willy!" she said.

He glanced at her sharply, and then laughed.

"Nice, isn't it, Auntie My? But that's only the beginning. I have several pieces as good as that, and some jewellery. How I should like to dress you up in necklaces, and tiaras, and bracelets, and rings! They're awfully becoming, and you

would look awfully fetching wearing them. Don't you see, that's where the wicked injustice of the present distribution of wealth comes in. That's just what makes me so mad. A few women are walking Bond Street shop-windows, walking gem-pits; and others, the great majority, haven't so much as a sixpenny trinket. Take yourself, for instance, Auntie. You like jewellery as much as any one, and it'd set you off, make you look no end sweet. And what have you ever had? Why shouldn't you, and such women as you, have your share? It's iniquitous that some should have nothing and others so much. It's a crying shame that any sensitive man's gorge rises at."

He was working himself up into a state of high indignation, his speech becoming rapid and passionate.

"Oh! how I loathe, how I hate the

rich!" he cried. "For they are responsible, not only for the poverty, but for the temptations, and vices, the unnumbered moral sufferings and degradations of the working classes. The rich ought to be pillaged; they ought to be penalised, stripped to the skin, and pitched, naked and gibbering, out of their gorgeous castles and palaces into the street. Why should they swallow all the dainties till they're fed up to bursting-point, while the rest of us have to go empty? Or, refusing to go empty, are driven to lie and steal for a bare pittance? It's a holy war in which any means are fair and just—they must go—must be hunted down, as you'd hunt down a mad dog——"

And so on and so on, while scattered crumpled paper wrappings accumulated upon the floor, and an array of precious, costly articles upon the rickety Pembroke

table. A necklace of amethysts set in brilliants. A couple of gold and tortoise-shell snuff-boxes. An *étui,* in *Rose du Barry* enamel, with medallions and diaper work of diamonds. A string of fifty or sixty fine pearls, a couple of antique jewelled watches; bracelets and pendants of varying worth. A gold-mounted, melon-shaped, rock-crystal bowl; and lastly that shabby, square, plush-covered box.

Miss Miranda, her work-worn hands still clasped in her black merino lap, sat in silent wonder, the young man's fiery words beating upon her ears, the array of treasure dazzling her eyes. Outside, on the landing the cat mewed plaintively, and rattled the door-handle with its fore-paws, rearing itself upright.

CHAPTER IV

FROM that foggy November evening a new era dated in Miss Miranda Povey's experience. A nameless gladness had come to her. She carried it about with her, perpetually conscious of its hidden presence. Under its influence her short, trotting step grew more brisk, her brown eyes brighter, a certain merry slyness in their glance. She sang old-fashioned ditties to herself, softly, as she sat sewing or went about her house-work. Once, breaking out into unbridled extravagance, she bought a pink primula, in a pot, off a hawker's barrow. It cost ninepence. She even tied a piece of string through an empty cotton-reel, and in idle moments drew it across the kitchen floor or

dangled it over a chair-back to amuse the cat. The elder Miss Povey noted all this, but, in obedience to the Povey code of good manners, made no comment. The stern hand of economy pressed hard on No. 4, Talavera Crescent that winter and the following spring. Food was none too abundant, coals decidedly short, and the weather persistently odious. The primula drooped, fragrant woolly leaves and flower-heads alike damping off from the stalks. Yet, as Miss Povey thankfully acknowledged, she had not known her dear niece in better health or spirits for years.

In the cupboard, built into the wall of Miss Miranda's bedroom on the right of the fireplace, stood a small yellow tin trunk, strapped and padlocked. In it, on that eventful November evening, she packed away the jewellery and other pre-

cious things Willy Evans had brought. The young man helped, kneeling on the floor beside her, handing her the parcels and verifying their contents. For many days afterwards, going into her room in the half-dark, she seemed to see his bent head and the quick, nervous movements of his fingers, to hear the rustle of tissue paper and sound of his carefully lowered voice, and to perceive the faint smell of cigarettes and of Tatcho which clung to his clothes and his hair respectively. The packing had been concluded and Willy out of the house, empty leather bag and all, before the return of Miss Povey and her irascible escort. Later Miss Miranda duly reported the fact of Willy's visit, adding that he had brought some valuables which he had asked her to take care of, but the exact nature and amount of the said valuables she did not disclose.

"As Other Auntie isn't home, the matter may just as well rest as between us two," Willy had said at parting. "She's very trusting. She won't ask questions."

And it must be admitted that, notwithstanding the deep affection she bore her aunt, this secrecy was pleasant to Miss Miranda, giving her a sense of independence and ownership pathetic enough in its way.

Then, too, the shabby blue plush-covered box had not been bestowed with the rest of the treasure. For, hearing her childlike outcry of pleasure at sight of the little old-world toy it contained, Evans, sincere in insincerity, had been seized with compunction, plus an irresistible impulse to do the handsome and generous thing by her.

"Have it, Auntie My," he said; "have it for your own. You've been a positive

"Have it, Auntie My," he said. "Have it for your own."

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angel to me. Accept this as a keepsake. Of course I'd ever so much rather give you something really worth having, like those amethysts or pearls. But, you see, I am not free to make presents of them. I have only a share in what profit we may make on them. But this''—he weighed the little silver-gilt ship in the palm of his hand—"this is a trifle I can do as I like with. It is an old piece which has been in stock for months. Melted down, it would be worth next to nothing as metal. So don't scruple, Auntie My, dear. If you fancy it, let me give it to you for your own."

Thus for Miss Miranda began the worship of the golden galleon, which—such is the power of the human mind—or is it, perhaps, the human heart?—over the poor human body, of spirit over matter—kept her warm when firing was scant, fed

when meals were skimpy, contented and cheerful under the depressing atmospheric conditions of a notably long and gloomy London winter and spring.

At intervals Willy Evans brought some fresh curio, piece of plate or jewellery, or fetched away one for which he reported a purchaser. Then the ceremony of opening the yellow trunk and checking its contents, followed by that lingering after-vision and incense-scent of mingled hair-wash and tobacco, would be repeated in Miss Miranda's bed-chamber. But the young man failed to fulfil his promise of staying with his landladies. His visits, though not infrequent, were hurried, and almost furtive in character. He pleaded business as an excuse—that of his friends the curio-dealers, and of the advanced Radical Circle of which he announced himself an active member. He was want-

ed for meetings, for addresses, for the organisation of local branches, so he said. "His time wasn't his own, or very much more of it would be put in at Talavera Crescent—the dear little Aunties understood that, didn't they? Of course, he knew they did. They were always awfully sweet and good to him." Which gloss was certainly a useful one; since, truth to tell, he was far from explicit as to the exact nature of his occupations and his movements. He generalised, being, as it seemed, always too pushed for time to explain. To this the Miss Poveys took no exception. It impressed them, since it showed, surely, how the dear fellow was getting on. Portraits in the picture papers must be very near now!

His moods, meanwhile, were manifold. Sometimes he poured forth noble sentiments concerning the progress of the

species and the rights of man. At others he appeared immersed in really rather sordid calculations of pounds, shillings, and pence. Then, and then only, did Miss Miranda deplore her and her aunt's straightened circumstances. It would have been so delicious to give. Sometimes he was sentimental, sloppily, tearfully affectionate. Sometimes he was melancholy, even morose, his tone snappy, his language decidedly lacking in reticence and refinement. Further, at this period, he was invariably nervous, jerky in mind and body, badly on edge and overstrung. Yet through all these changing aspects the dazzle, not to say intoxicant, of his youth and of that promised great career, at once blinded Miss Miranda's eyes to his many failings and uplifted her soul with the belief that she was witnessing, even humbly forwarding, the ad-

vent of the new Golden Age, of the social and economic millennium.

Therefore twice daily, strong in faith and hope, half-serious, whimsically tricking herself with innocent childlike ceremonies, did Miss Miranda freight the little battered four-inch golden ship with rainbow-hued visions of coming glory; while, during the intervening hours, she walked in the light given off by that glittering, though doubtfully seaworthy craft and its radiant impalpable cargo.

Unluckily, since, now as ever, confirmed idealists are in a conspicuously small minority, there was quite another side to this whole business. Evans, being accurately acquainted with the routine of the little household, found it easy to arrange his visits at hours when the elder Miss Povey was out, at church, or doing her modest shoppings, or calling upon her

modest acquaintance. And this selection of times and seasons by no means escaped the observation of Mr. Chidcock, who was short of occupation and by nature suspicious. The detection of evildoing and subsequent castigation of the evildoer held, for him, all the fabled enchantments of debauch. He revelled in it. Now, inspired by that pharisaic non-charity which so often masquerades under the name of righteous indignation, he set himself to watch.

"It is useless to tell me something very underhand is not going on next door, Mary," he said to his wife—a low-spirited, faded, childless failure of a woman, who may not unfittingly be described as the human waste-paper basket into which he flung such unconsidered scraps and tags of conversation as fell from his lips during the absence of more worthy audi-

ence. "Sooner or later it will come to Miss Povey's knowledge, and to the knowledge of many others besides Miss Povey, if I am not mistaken, and then it will all have to be sifted out."

"You don't mean anything wrong is going on next door, do you, Samuel?" Mrs. Chidcock ventured timidly.

"Don't I mean it?" he retorted. "Well, of course, there may be differences of opinion as to what is wrong. I am a plain man, and stand by the laws of England and the Ten Commandments. And so I call deception wrong. I call the secret manufacture of engines of destruction wrong."

"Oh, Samuel, don't you be so very terrifying, please, or I shall never sleep!"—this from the poor woman, on the verge of tears.

"Yes, the walls are thin," he remarked

reflectively. "Of course," he continued, "there are those who call wrong right. I don't pretend to argue with them. I don't pretend to be able to convince them. I don't wish to be associated with them in any sort or kind of fashion. Let them go their way and I will go mine. Only when they intrude themselves upon me, when I have reason to believe they are carrying on a dangerous and unlawful trade in the very next house, I cannot deny that it makes me very uneasy, very uneasy indeed. Living so near, one does not know how far one mayn't be involved."

Poor Mrs. Chidcock, though close to the sitting-room fire, shook aspenwise.

"And that is a very objectionable thought to an honest, law-abiding man like myself. I have a respect for Miss Povey, too. As your sex goes, Mary, I

allow I find her intelligent and well-meaning. So I am sorry for her. She is being hoaxed and imposed upon. For no sooner is she out of the house than that young fellow Evans nips into it. And he is up to something that he should not be —not a doubt about it. I tell you in confidence I do not like the look of it in the least. He has been getting above himself and going downhill for a long while now. Thrown up his clerkship, and picking up a living anyhow. Mixed himself up, as I hear, with the Socialist crew—low-class foreign ruffians who stop at nothing. Ah!" he added, holding himself erect and blowing out his stout and somewhat balloon-like torso, "if I had the administration of the Aliens Act for a month or two there would be a pretty clean sweep of those gentry, I promise you."

Then, nomination to the post of Home

Secretary not appearing exactly imminent, Mr. Chidcock went down the backyard to close the shed in which he kept his fancy rabbits.

It was between six and half-past in the clear, luminous dusk of a late October evening, a tang of coming frost in the air. Above the dark, curved block of the Crescent and the taller houses to right and left of it, the glare thrown up from the lighted streets passed into a dead whiteness, in which showed the living whiteness of a thin crescent moon and one attendant star. Sounds carried, sharpened by the coming frost. Children called to one another playing in a side street; and the long-drawn wails and explosive impacts of a cat-fight were distinguishable in the near distance. Mr. Chidcock turned on the bull's-eye lantern he carried, and reviewed the range of hutches,

counting his furry flock. A row of pink, twitching muzzles poked out between the wooden bars eager for supper. Deciding upon a redistribution of certain marital relations, Mr. Chidcock set down the bull's-eye; and opening one hutch, after a period of clutching on his part and scrabbling on that of the resident rabbit, took out a big grey Angora buck by the ears. As he turned, blowing slightly with the exertion of capture, through the half-open doorway of the shed, his attention was attracted by a light in the second-floor window of the Miss Poveys' house.

The blind was down, and upon it, as upon the screen of a cinematograph, two shadows played, that of a man and woman, seen to a little below the waist. The man, who, judging by his slight build and rapid movements, was young, appeared to be handing a series of rounded oblong

objects to the woman, who in her turn bent down after receiving each one, almost disappearing from sight, and then bobbed up again.

Mr. Chidcock watched, oblivious of the dangling rabbit, its fore-paws pressed tightly together in an attitude of prayer.

The shadows ceased handing suspicious objects to one another, and remained standing, earnestly engaged in talk. The man's shadow drew close. For an instant the two commingled, then moved a little apart again.

The blood rushed to Mr. Chidcock's head. His eyes started. He skirted the edge of apoplexy and craved to loosen his collar.

"Disgraceful, scandalous—what next, if you please?" he puffed. "Pretty goings on, upon my sammy. He—he kissed her!"

But here the rabbit—upon whose ears

his grasp had tightened unmercifully—having dangled to the point of anguish, sought relief in convulsive kickings, while the others, partly in sympathy for the sufferings of their comrade, partly in eagerness for supper, stamped loudly upon the wooden flooring of their respective hutches. Mr. Chidcock, still puffing and apoplectic, surrendered automatically to their demands. By the time he had finished housing and feeding them the light in the second-floor window had been extinguished and the shadows had disappeared.

"Bombs!" he ejaculated, in an awe-struck voice, as he fastened the padlock on the door of the shed.

He walked half-way up the backyard, a sense of awe still upon him. The bottom seemed knocked out of probability. The most extravagant tales he had ever

read and pooh-poohed, with contemptuous, sceptical superiority, darted suddenly into the range of things possible and even practical. For it is one affair to rig up bogies, with which to terrify such members of the despised female sex as are dependent upon you, and quite another for those same bogies to leap into actual being terrifyingly confronting your own great self. Mr. Chidcock was conscious of a certain weakness in his knees. He leaned against one of the posts carrying the clothes-line for support.

"Bombs!" he repeated. "I own I have hinted as much to Mary, but I never really believed they could be up to such wickedness next door—never in life. Well, what London does hold! And who'd have thought it of Miss Miranda! They say the quiet ones are the worst; but who,

in reason, could ever have pictured such goings-on as that!"

Here, the post cracking slightly under the weight of his shoulder, Mr. Chidcock started and held himself stiffly erect.

"On a man's private premises, too, as you may say," he added incoherently.

Then, making a strong effort, morally speaking, he braced himself. For there was fight, of the ruffling bantam-cock sort, in the ex-oil-and-colourman. His moment of weakness passed, while the God of Battles seemed to beckon to him as he stood in the frosty air scrutinising the back of the Miss Poveys' mild, shabby little dwelling-house.

"It means nothing less than murder, wholesale and retail murder," he said, "if it's not stopped. So my course is clear. I must lose no time in reporting the discovery to the police. An honest man's first

duty is the preservation of his own good name and the lives of his fellow-citizens. But that Miss Miranda—kissing! kissing, with her two hands, as you may say, cram-full of destruction and death—the slut!"

CHAPTER V

THAT same night Miss Miranda's exaltation reached the confines of ecstasy. To this end fasting probably contributed; since, the larder being practically bare, she had supped off such portions of two aged bananas as were not actually poisonous and half a water-biscuit, pleading a quite imaginary headache in the hope of securing a less attenuated meal to her aunt.

Once in her room—the atmosphere of which, to her hunger-sharpened senses, was still redolent of Willy Evans's late presence—she took the blue plush box from its hiding-place and put it and its precious contents upon the top of the chest of drawers. Scrupling to keep the

gas burning, as the gas-rate was paid by Miss Povey, she lighted two red and yellow tapers set in a pair of dwarf brass candlesticks, and ranged them on either side the blue-plush stand. She had saved a trifle from the small sum she reserved as her dress allowance, and had purchased a box of these tapers — the left-overs of Christmas-trees—at a general dealer's store. The wax of them was moulded into twisted spirals, like barley-sugar sticks. This she admired greatly. But only at intervals, when she was extra cold or hungry so that idealism needed stimulation, or after one of Willy's visits as an act of thanksgiving, did she permit herself the extravagance of such illumination. To-night, for it was keenly cold, all these causes united to justify a keeping of high festival. So she undressed quick-

ly, turned out the gas, and hurried into bed.

The bed was hard, the flock mattress knotty; she had to lie in a constrained position to avoid the lumps in it. But these discomforts were of small moment, since she could give herself over to contemplation of the glittering ship, flanked by the twinkling sugar-stick tapers, without fear of interruption. All the day's obligations in respect of cooking, mending, house-work, and in merry endurance of many little privations and mishaps, had been fulfilled. She had earned the right both to playtime and to rest. And so she drew the bedclothes high about her shoulders, crossed her hands—the backs and wrists of them chapped and smarting from hard water and the pinch of the frost—upon the bosom of her longcloth nightdress, and, holding her will in abey-

ance, gave her imagination and her senses free rein, letting them take their own way with her until such time as the tapers should be burnt out.

Miss Miranda was serene in spirit, was indeed richly and actively happy, lying there watching the vacillating light that played over the dented surface of the golden sails, as though these now shivered, now bellied bravely, the free sea-wind filling them, while the golden hull, built high stem and stern castle-fashion, rose and fell on the blue-royal of lazy tropic waves. It was so charmingly pretty and finished, yet so largely romantic, so immensely far removed, in aspect and suggestion, from the hard actualities of the cold, crowded, unquiet London night!

And that passing realisation of sleepless London, seething for miles on every

side, carried her thought forward to the land the ship was bound for—the Land of the Good Time Coming of which dear Willy Evans so splendidly talked at times. The land for which the youth of each generation so gallantly and, for the most part, so vainly sets sail in turn, and in which she, though no longer young, thanks to her great innocence, still so steadfastly and ardently believed. Drenched, so to speak, with golden haze, all the promise of that fair land arose before her—a place of equal rights and equal laws, of wide-spreading people's parks and garden cities. No rates and taxes to pay there. No poverty to weep over. No false weights and measures, whether in matters material or matters spiritual. No backbiting, no spite and lying. No soul-stultifying struggle to keep up genteel appearances

on nothing a year. No cruelty, whether wickedly intentional or mere stupid carelessness towards human beings or helpless bird or beast. No fallen women, no sin, no fogs, no dirt. Heaven in full blast, in short, here upon our rascally, though in this respect hardly recognisable, old earth and that apostolic, eminently gifted young man, Willy Evans, naturally and very conspicuously Chairman of the Board of Directors of it all.

To Miss Miranda this somewhat incoherent and contradictory forecast of the near future of humanity appeared very beautiful, very consoling. Her hands trembled as they lay crossed upon her bosom, though whether from the lowness of the temperature or from glad emotion it would be difficult to determine. Her brown eyes were suffused by tears which she made an effort to wink away, for the

little twisted candles were burnt half down and she wanted to miss no moment of their telling. But the tears refused to be winked away. They remained, or fresh ones took their place, so obscuring her vision that the outlines of the golden ship and its attendant tapers grew indistinct, showing as a moon, a circular disc of enchanted, strangely transfigured brightness amid the colourless gloom of the ugly back-bedroom.

Presently it seemed to Miss Miranda that the luminous disc began to move, floating towards her across the dark, intervening space. Its light was in itself and remained in itself. It illumined none of the surrounding objects. And of this she was glad, for they were not particularly attractive. Now it rose a little, and hung poised above her bed, so that she no longer looked across, but up at it. And,

doing so, she became sensible of a rapture, both of soul and body, so exquisite as to be almost unendurable. She had no wish it should cease, yet feared she could not support it and continue to live. She struggled to cry out, but her voice refused to come. And so she lay rigid, helpless, mute, transfixed by delicious anguish. And this lasted, as it seemed, for a long, long while, an eternal moment, during which all the component parts of her being were fused into a single, universal sensation of beatified pain.

Then, at last, slowly, in the center of the brooding light, she began to distinguish not the form of the little silver gilt ship, but the features of a man's face. Whose face? At first she was doubtful. Then, why, of course, she knew it!—Willy Evans's face, with all the doubtful, tell-tale lines, all traces of nervousness,

irritability, temper, obliterated from it, while unsullied youth and affection and the effulgence of genius remained. There it was, there it was—and her heart seemed breaking with thankfulness—all that she had hoped and believed of him, and more than all, visibly come true! Then Miss Miranda perceived that she too was young. Her hands were white and soft; it was quite a pleasure to look at them! And they held a splendid shower-bouquet of white hot-house flowers and an ivory-bound prayer-book. Aunt was there as well, handsomely dressed in mauve cashmere, with a cream lace bonnet and scarf. And—why—surely they were in church? A very large, lofty church, full of people, the sunshine streaming down through painted windows high, high up in the walls, and shining gold ornaments and lighted candles

upon the great altar. There was a smell of cigarettes and Tatcho in the air, which seemed rather funny in such a stately place; yet—Miss Miranda was conscious of smiling slyly at Willy, who stood in front of the burnished altar-rails close beside her—she liked it. But the organist was just beginning to play the Wedding March, and——

The clanging bell of an electric tram rang out harshly through the frosty air. Miss Miranda sat bolt upright, all of a piece, in the hard box bed.

The coloured tapers had burned right down in the sockets of the little brass candlesticks. They flickered feebly, giving off a sickly light, while a coil of oily smoke curled upward from the end of either long, red-nosed wick. And in the dimness the ship was barely visible—

showing as the veriest shadow and ghost of a brave little ship.

Miss Miranda rose, blew out the smoking, smelly tapers, and crept back, in the dark, to bed. She pulled the clothes up round her shoulders again, and settled herself, with long-suffering patience, so as to avoid the worst of the mattress lumps. But she shivered. She had a sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach. She knew she was hungry. She knew she was cold. She knew she was just upon fifty.

The last of the trams passed, citywards, to its garage; and the fierce, uneasy stillness which holds Greater London during the small hours reigned. And Miss Miranda, though she scolded herself for her weakness, cried softly, lying there and listening to it, alone in the darkness of the night. For the hour of her ecstasy was

over. It had racked her with the anguish of mysterious joys. She was racked still, inasmuch as she ached with tiredness from head to foot. And she felt desolate as never before—too desolate by far for any hope of refuge in dear deceits of dreamful sleep.

CHAPTER VI

IT must have been nearly a week later, one day at dinner, that Miss Povey mentioned having seen a policeman and "what looked like a plain-clothes constable," standing talking with Mr. Chidcock in his back-yard, just down by the shed. She added that she "never remembered to have heard Mr. Chidcock speak of his having a friend in the Force. Perhaps they'd come in to see the fancy rabbits. She supposed the police had their hobbies just like other men, and Mr. Chidcock's Angoras were known to have taken a number of prizes at the shows. Only when she caught sight of the constables they seemed to be paying more attention to the backs of the houses in the Crescent

than to Mr. Chidcock's pets. Nobody," she continued, "had a greater respect for the police than herself; still it always did seem to give you a sort of turn to see them on private premises. You couldn't help feeling they might be on the look-out for somebody."

To which Miss Miranda replied cheerily—

"Well, they can't be on the lookout for you or me, or anybody we are acquainted with, anyhow, Aunt dear. Depend upon it, they came just to see the fancy rabbits." Then she added, as she cleared the dinner-table, wanting in the goodness of her heart, for the elder lady's sake, to laugh the matter off, that—"For her part she was wonderfully partial to the Force. Think of the crossings, now, with all the motor traffic! Why, a constable was as welcome as a lifeboat in a ship-

wreck. In all that confusing noise and bustle whatever would one do without them?"

Nevertheless, it must be owned, it perplexed her that two well-dressed men so frequently paced, back and forth, on the length of pavement against the iron railings, and even passed slowly along the private roadway of the Crescent itself sometimes towards dusk. One of them wore a close black beard, the other was clean-shaven. Both had what she defined as a "military walk." More than once, when shutting up the house at night, she fancied she recognised the bearded man —such a fine, tall, handsome fellow, too —moving about Mr. Chidcock's yard in the neighbourhood of the shed. But of these hauntings, whether real or imaginary, she said nothing to her aunt. She wished in every particular to spare her,

for there could be no question but that the elder Miss Povey's health, as the year turned, began to fail somewhat. The deprivations of the last fifteen months, the long, gloomy winter and spring, followed by heavy summer heats, had told upon her. She was not, as Miss Miranda distressfully put it, "a bit like herself." Trifles depressed and worried her. She spoke anxiously of the future, and the time when the leases of 4 and 5 Talavera Crescent would run out. A very little shopping would tire her. She said it made her head go round to hear the noise and see the movement of the streets. She would talk of the time when they were better off, and could go for a day's outing to Epping Forest, or from London Bridge to Greenwich by steamboat.

Not for a moment did Miss Povey complain; but it was only too clear that

her thoughts constantly reverted to the less happy aspects of her life. Therefore to care for, and comfort, and cosset her—in as far as an attenuated income permitted—became her devoted niece's first object. Miss Miranda rose earlier, went to bed later. The worshipful playtime given, night and morning, to the golden galleon was cut short. Silently, almost stealthily, she appropriated those portions of kitchen and house-work which heretofore had fallen to the elder lady's share. She had no time now to nurse frost-bitten primulas or to twirl cotton-reels to amuse the cat. Morning, noon, and night she trotted industriously, asserting with heroic mendacity all the while that "it wasn't necessary, of course. She did it simply from choice. It's ever so healthy for the liver, and keeps you so nice and warm, too, and makes you sleep sound to

be stirring about." Willy Evans's visits were conspicuous by their absence at this period. But though she suffered a heart-sick longing, at moments, for the sight of his face, the sound of his voice and scent of his cigarettes, she had not leisure to dwell on all that.

And still the two tall, well-dressed men haunted the purlieus of Talavera Crescent. But about this likewise she really had not leisure to think.

Her labours were increased early in December by Miss Povey getting a sharp attack of influenza, which compelled her to remain in bed for the better part of a fortnight, and left her sadly depressed and weak. The first evening she was sufficiently convalescent to move into the front sitting-room, adjoining her bedchamber, for tea, constituted quite a frolic for Miss Miranda.

"The house seems so quiet and empty, Aunt dear," she said, "when you're laid by. Mrs. Shoppen's stayed overtime to tidy up, so as to set me free to sit here with you. She brought in a twopenny tea-cake—look! She thought of that herself."

The expression of Miss Miranda's tired little face was very soft and bright.

"Oh! Mrs. Shoppen is a kind creature," she said. "I'm sure we are very fortunate to have such a good, steady person to depend upon, one who has our interests so much at heart. There's a lot to be grateful for, Auntie dear. And Mrs. Chidcock's sent Gladys Em'ly round every day to inquire, while you were in bed."

Then she tucked the tartan shawl more closely about Miss Povey's knees as she rested in the corner of the sofa. Marquis

shared the sofa, *couchant,* his black arms and white paws resting upon Miss Povey's lap. He kept very still; but his ears were pricked, as though listening. His stiff, white whiskers twitched, and he lashed his piebald tail gently now and again, while his yellow-green eyes were singularly alive and alight.

Miss Miranda found it wonderfully pleasant to sit there before the fire and eat tea-cake—she carefully selected the quarters which were least buttery or slightly burnt. She had not had such a happy, peaceful hour for weeks. Conversation dropped. Miss Povey lay back against the pillows, dozing. Presently she slept; and Miss Miranda, assured of her immediate well-being and comfort, gazed into the crimson incandescence striped by the thin, black bars of the old-fashioned grate, her body in conscious repose, her

The door opened cautiously and Mrs Sheppen..... beckoned to her in agitated silence

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thought vague yet beneficent, moving in a glow of thankfulness. And then the door opened cautiously, and Mrs. Shoppen—a long, lean, large-boned, rusty-coloured woman, with a face like a middle-aged 'bus-horse—beckoned to her in agitated silence.

The landing struck cold after the high temperature of the sitting-room, and Mrs. Shoppen's whispered communication proved lengthy and confused of delivery. As Miss Miranda gathered the sense of it, she raised both hands with a stifled ejaculation of protest and distress.

"Tell him I'll come. I'll come at once, Mrs. Shoppen. Only be very quiet, won't you; and ask him to be very quiet too. I wouldn't have Aunt know on any account. She'd be so cruelly upset. Oh! whatever is Marquis at?"

For the cat, jumping off the couch, had

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followed her to the door; and now, standing upright, rattled the handle with its fore-paws. Miss Miranda opened the door again and peeped in to assure herself. Miss Povey still slept, while the cat, slipping past her, rubbed itself against the balusters with a great tail and arched back. A wicked humour seemed to have taken it. It preceded Miss Miranda down the narrow flight, stopping at intervals so suddenly, just under her feet, as to make her stumble. Whisking across the entry and rearing up, it rubbed itself against the jamb of the dining-room, door, turned a half-somersault, writhing, twisting, rolling over and over in postures at once voluptuous and fierce.

The shutters were closed. The room, to Miss Miranda's eyes, still dazzled by staring into the red heart of the fire upstairs, appeared wholly dark. From the

far end of the dinner-table a figure rose. Broad, pale bands, the colour of whitey-brown paper, encircled its head and were drawn low over the left ear. The featureless face matched the bands in colour. The effect was as of something abnormal, amorphous. For it seemed, at first sight, as though the head were independent, detached, whatever of body might belong to it shading insensibly into the surrounding gloom. By a rather cruel turn of irony Miss Miranda, gazing at it, remembered the luminous disc that floated above her bed in the hour of her ecstasy. She knew that the face that had looked at her then, purified and transfigured from out the midst of that enchanted brightness, looked at her now. Then it had been very beautiful, satisfying all her aspirations and longings, crowning her meagre little life with unhoped-for, unlimited delight.

Now, in as far as she could distinguish the outlines of it at all, it showed hideous, ghastly, a merciless caricature of that which she had so innocently trusted in and loved. For the moment speech and movement alike were impossible to her.

"It's me, Auntie My," Willy Evans said feebly and brokenly. "I've met with an accident in—in—the traffic. I have had a fall. I lost a lot of blood, and I can't stand the sight of blood; it knocks my nerves to bits. I could not stay at my place by myself. I felt I must get back here. I wanted you, Auntie My. I wanted home—home here, where I used to be happy, where I knew I should feel safe."

He sobbed almost hysterically, pallid whitey-brown paper hands rising through the darkness to hold the pallid whitey-brown paper head.

"For I'm safe here, aren't I, Auntie

My?" he went on. "I am so shaken up. I can't control myself. I am frightened. Be good to me. You'll keep me, Auntie My; say you'll keep me! You won't turn me out? You'll let me have my old room and stay the night?"

Listening to which piteous appeal Miss Miranda very thoroughly recovered both speech and movement. Coming along beside the table, she held her arms out wide.

"Oh! my Willy, my dear, my poor, poor dear!" she cried. "Keep you? Why, of course I'll keep you. Of course, I could never, never turn you out. It will feel just like old times, dearie; and you shall tell me all about your accident. Only Other Auntie's ill, so we must be very quiet——"

And there she broke off abruptly, for the knocker rapped, not loudly, but re-

peatedly and distinctly. While Marquis, further excited by the sound of it, bounding into the room, sprang upon the dinner-table, making queer chirruping noises in his throat.

"Ah! Ah! who's knocking?—Who's at the door?" Evans gasped. "Ah! damn it all, what—what's that?"

"Nothing, dearest, nothing but silly old Marquis—and I daresay its one of the tradespeople at the door," she answered soothingly. "Wait while I send them away. I won't be half a second before I am back."

But upon the doorstep two tall men stood. One had a close black beard. The other was thin-featured and clean-shaven. The black-bearded man, hat in hand, his manner scrupulously civil, his expression kindly, even pitying, as he looked down at little Miss Miranda and spoke—

"We are very sorry to put you to any trouble, Miss, but we are police-officers, and hold a warrant to search this house. We have reason to believe goods of an unlawful and dangerous character are concealed here."

Before Miss Miranda, in her utter amazement, had time to make any reply, Willy Evans, darting along the entry, thrust her aside roughly, and, lowering his head—swathed in bloodstained surgical bandages—with a sort of yelp, dived out between the two detectives.

But the clean-shaven man was too quick for him, tripping and then clutching him, just in time to prevent his falling headlong down the stone steps into the road.

"Steady, young hopeful, steady!" he said. "You're fairly nabbed at last! Show a little consideration for the lady

and come quietly. It's no earthly use to kick up a rumpus. We have plenty of constables quite handy, stationed back and front of the place."

CHAPTER VII

MISS MIRANDA stood on the upper landing just under the gas-jet. Her shadow crouched at her feet, lengthening out across the chess-board pattern linoleum when she moved, and rushing back to the hem of her black skirt again, as though scared, when she resumed her position. She was very, very tired. She leaned her back against the wall for support. At moments the floor and the housemaid's cupboard—with its clinging odour of stale soap—the old wicker chair and its cushions of worn Turkey-red, shifted and wavered, making her fear she might faint.

And it was not the least in her programme to faint. She must keep going,

for everybody's sake, until this storm of rough improbabilities which had so unexpectedly descended upon humdrum little No. 4, Talavera Crescent, in the last hour, should have abated and finally cleared up. For of course it would clear up. Miss Miranda would have scorned to doubt that. The commotion would cease. The two men, there, in her bedroom opposite, would have finished their inquisition. The thought of masculine eyes scanning and masculine hands investigating all her possessions, her modest wardrobe, her small treasures —innocent, secret, intimate things dear to her heart—shocked her woman's pride and woman's modesty alike. But she refused to let her mind dwell on that. They were very gentlemanly and thoughtful, she told herself. Hadn't they taken off their boots and crept upstairs in their

stocking-feet, to avoid disturbing Aunt in case she was still asleep? She bore them no ill-will. It wasn't their fault. They were only acting according to orders—the orders of that great, relentless inhuman machine which is called Law, Government, the State. Only, as she told herself, the great machine was going to be disappointed this time. For though they might search, there was nothing in the world for them to find, the presence of which could not be fully accounted for.

And the crowd was going to be disappointed too. That mysterious London crowd, always composed, as it seems, of the same individuals, which arrives instantly, drawn by apprehension of possible scandal and disaster, as vultures by apprehension of death and corruption, from no man knows whither. Such a crowd had collected in the puddle-

patched roadway and hung over the street railings staring, as she knew. All the Crescent, indeed, must have its head out of windows by this time. Miss Miranda shrank, in disgust, from such shame of publicity, such damage of family respectability, such "passing of remarks." So she refused to dwell on that in thought either. For the crowd had make a mistake. There was nothing for its morbid curiosity to fatten upon; and so, shortly, it would vanish, absorbed by the mighty ocean of London, empty as it came.

If only poor Aunt would continue to sleep meantime; and if only Mrs. Shoppen would be careful what she said to her! Miss Miranda did not quite approve of Mrs. Shoppen's attitude. For the 'bus-horse snorted and pranced, so to speak, with unseemly excitement, professing sorrow, yet greedy of scandal even

as the crowd. Therefore upon thought of the perfidious Shoppen she also refused to dwell. For so soon it would be all over, the detectives gone, the house quiet, she herself free.

And then would come her reward. Miss Miranda sighed contentedly, and moved a step or two away from the supporting wall, while her lurking shadow darted out, impish in outline, across the floor. For Willy Evans—now by some inconceivable misunderstanding shut in the dining-room in charge of a stalwart policeman in uniform—had come to stay. He was ill, almost out of his head, poor dear, as that frenzied rush down the passage, in which, not recognising her, he had thrust her aside so roughly, very clearly proved. But by illness Miss Miranda was by no means dismayed. It gave him into her hands. She would keep

him the longer, nurse him, coax him back into health. He would be dependent upon her. She paused, letting her thought rest sweetly on that. She didn't want to be selfish, but she did almost hope he wouldn't get well so very soon—not just yet.

A movement in the bedroom; voices, low-pitched, in rapid question and answer. Then the black-bearded detective came out. He looked keenly at Miss Miranda, passing his left hand down meditatively over his cheek and the line of his jaw. His expression was of perplexed amusement—the rather hard amusement of one who has been outwitted by that which he cannot but acknowledge is a clever trick. He towered above Miss Miranda, the top of his head within a few inches of the low ceiling; and she gazed up at him with a disarming touch of ad-

miration in her pretty, patient, tired eyes. Whereupon—being, after all, but human—his aspect softened, the expression passing from amusement to compunction in his handsome face.

"I am afraid I shall have to trouble you with a few questions, Miss," he said. "May I ask you to come inside?"

"Oh, yes!" Miss Miranda replied quite brightly. For she was eager to have the misunderstanding cleared up and be free to claim her reward.

In the middle of the room stood the tin trunk, open. The second detective, the clean-shaven one, knelt by it on one knee. He held a slip of paper on which Willy Evans had written and rewritten the record of its contents, in one hand. In the other he held the melon-shaped gold-mounted rock-crystal bowl. Miss Miranda resented his kneeling there in

Willy's stead, resented his examining the contents of the trunk. But in its accustomed place on the top of the chest of drawers the golden galleon sailed the blue plush sea. Miss Miranda, checking her feeling of resentment, tried to fix her eyes and thoughts on that. For wasn't it a ship of comfort, freighted with full cargo of hope and promise, sailing on gallantly, bravely to the Land of the Good Time Coming? And so she paid but scant attention to the bearded detective's next speech.

"You are not on oath," he said. "We cannot compel you to answer questions; and I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. Still, it would forward the ends of justice, and be very much best for yourself in the long run, too, if you will give us all

the information you can about these articles."

He pointed to the open trunk.

"They belong to a friend of my aunt's and mine. He asked us to take care of them here because he has no suitable place to keep them at. And we were very glad to oblige him"—tenderly defiant pride touched her tone and bearing—"in this as in anything else. We have a great respect and regard for him. We feel it a privilege to assist him in any way we can."

The kneeling detective glanced sideways at her, with raised eyebrows.

"Some of these goods are very valuable," he said. "Your friend must be rich, Miss."

"Oh dear no!" she answered warmly. "He does not hold with riches. He is all for the working classes and the poor. And

he is a beautiful speaker. It is touching to hear him tell of the rights and sufferings of the people."

Here conflict between the duty of secrecy enjoined, and the desire to testify to righteousness, came into conflict. Miss Miranda paused; but the desire to testify carried it.

"He had a clerkship in a City house, but he gave it up because his employers tried to stop him speaking in public. Anyone can understand that," she declared, rising to a slyness of gentle irony. "They were rich themselves, and what he said seemed to reflect on them. It was very hard for him, as he has no private means; but he could not be false to what he believed."

Her voice mellowed to a crooning, and her tired face was sweet to look upon.

"Willy couldn't be false," she said. "He would rather suffer anything himself than be untrue to those who trusted him."

"Willy — Willy who?" the clean-shaven man said abstractedly, as he leaned down further to examine the contents of the tin trunk.

"Willy Evans."

"Ah, to be sure; the young gentleman downstairs who seemed a little excitable when he met us in the passage."

"But he wasn't himself," Miss Miranda protested; "not in the least himself, or he would never have behaved so wildly. His head was affected by a bad accident he has had, and he didn't know what he was doing."

"Curious," the clean-shaven man commented, diving a careful hand into the trunk and bringing out a string of pearls

with a diamond clasp to it; "very curious."

"He was just telling me all about the accident—how he had been knocked down in the traffic——" Miss Miranda's voice shook. "By rights he ought to be in hospital now. But you see he lodged here with us for so many years, that he naturally turns to our place as home if he is in any sort of trouble."

"Yes, naturally." His hand dived again, brought up a gold *étui* enriched with diamond diaper-work on rose enamel, held it out at arm's length, examining it critically, while in the feeble gaslights the brilliants danced and darted like fairy fires. "Most of us are glad enough to have some safe place to run to when we are in a mess."

But the bearded man looked on the ground and shifted his position uneasily.

"Blest if this isn't the nastiest job I ever touched," he said almost audibly.

And Miss Miranda, seeing him move, hearing him mutter, looked up in his face —she liked him much the best of the two somehow—with the most transparent candour.

"I should be very glad to go and see after Willy now," she said. "Both he and my aunt, Miss Povey, require attention, and must be wondering what has become of me. I should be glad not to keep them waiting any longer, now that I have explained to you."

The clean-shaven man had risen to his feet. He held up the gorgeous *étui*.

"Uncommonly neat thing," he said, while somewhat merciless laughter flickered in his eyes. Then he looked full at his companion, as though asking some sign. The latter made no response, but,

turning to Miss Miranda, spoke in an indulgently reasoning tone—

"We don't want to detain you any longer than we are obliged to. But, even accepting what you have told us, it is unusual to find any one in the position of your young friend in possession of goods like these. You admit he is not rich, and these articles are worth a very large sum of money. We are bound to inquire how he came by them."

In body and mind alike Miss Miranda was very weary. It was hard work to stand upright, to choose her words, to speak clearly. She fixed her eyes on the little silver-gilt ship, trying to rally her fortitude by the remembrance of the Land of the Good Time Coming.

"That is quite simple," she said patiently. "Only it is Willy's own affair, and he does not care, I know, to have it

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spoken about. All these curios and jewellery came to him in the way of business. He is a dealer."

Again the clean-shaven man standing opposite looked full at the bearded man standing beside her. And again the latter addressed her indulgently.

"I know it must be very unpleasant for you," he said, "but I am sure you would be wise to take the advice I gave you at first and make a clean breast of it, Miss. I own we have not found what we reckoned on finding here; but what we have found is extremely compromising. As I have told you, we have no power to compel you; but we are certain to get at the facts sooner or later, and it would forward the ends of justice and make it much less awkward not only for yourself but your friend, Evans, if you could make up your mind to speak out."

And, thereupon, for the first time, it occurred to Miss Miranda that they doubted her word, believed she was trying to deceive and mislead them. This was as though they had struck her, maimed her, rendering her helpless. Her high faith, her heroic optimism was shaken, crumbling towards ruin. Glancing from one to the other, in hurried alarm, her sense of helplessness only deepened. They were so tall and strong and capable—past-masters in the arts of the great outside world of which she was so consciously ignorant, frighteningly out of place here within the narrow confines of her poorly furnished little back-bedroom. She became aware, too, that, notwithstanding their good looks and their civility, a foreign and sinister atmosphere surrounded them; so that she no longer associated them with amiable, broad-

shouldered, helmeted, blue-coated constables who hold up the roaring Jordan of the streets, enabling timorous age and reckless infancy to cross, so to speak, dry-shod. All the "accepted hells" of wickedness, cruelty, lust, and crime which lie beneath the decently swept and garnished surfaces of London—and of which she had always tried to hear and think as little as possible—asserted their existence as the corollary of these men's presence. The glare of that infernal conflagration must blind their eyes—could hardly help doing so—to simple, honest, ordinary ways of living and dealing. They must be forever on the look-out for wickedness—wasn't it just their profession?—and so must find what they looked for from sheer habit, to the confusion of the innocent with the guilty; lumping sometimes—and there she sickened with forebod-

ing of impending catastrophe—the most white-souled and philanthropic of youthful geniuses with commonest malefactors, felons, wastrels, rakes! All this came to her in no ordered progression of thought, but intuitively, as a tragedy of instantaneous apprehension, while she stood glancing fearfully from one waiting detective to the other.

"I can tell you nothing different to what I have told you, because it is quite true," she said at last, with a certain dignity of hopeless resignation.

"But you could tell us more if you chose, I fancy, and it would pay you to try," the clean-shaven man put in.

Miss Miranda only shook her head, smiling faintly, while her eyes fastened once again upon the golden galleon so bravely sailing its blue plush sea.

Then at last a sign did pass between the

two men, and again the clean-shaven one spoke.

"Would you be surprised to hear these articles are among the proceeds of a series of burglaries that have been carried out during the last eight or nine months?"

To Miss Miranda's seeing the glittering little ship began to toss and roll strangely upon the blue-plush sea.

"I have checked them all; and it may interest you to hear I recognise them from our descriptive lists of stolen goods at headquarters."

"You needn't rub it in, mate," the bearded man said softly.

"I want to give the lady time to think better of it and be more explicit."

But how the little ship laboured just now in that angry sea! Great hungry blue waves rushed on it, struck and almost engulfed it. Miss Miranda watched in

speechless fear. Could it ever live through such a storm to make port in the Land of the Good Time Coming?

"We have the names of the members of the gang that did those burglaries," he went on—"some English, one American, the rest foreigners. They are mostly old hands, well known to the police. Experts, as clever as they make 'em. Three of them were caught at a job in Holland Park last night. One got away, rather badly damaged; and we have pretty clear evidence that one is your excitable young friend, Mr. Willy Evans."

The little ship heeled over, righted itself, heeled again, turned turtle, foundered —its voyage of high promise done. Never now, very certainly, would it drop anchor in any port of the dear promised Land of the Good Time Coming.

"Oh no, no! It isn't so! It mustn't, it

cannot be!" Miss Miranda cried out loud, smitten by an extremity of anguish.

A sound of mighty waters was in her ears—waters in which she sank down, down, along with the wreck of the golden galleon, into unplumbed, unfathomable depths of merciful forgetfulness and repose.

The bearded detective lifted the small, hudled heap of inanimate womanhood off the floor and laid it upon the hard box-bed.

"You're wrong, matey," he said. "She's as innocent as a nursing infant—and she's half-starved, too, judging by the weight of her."

He straightened Miss Miranda's skirts gently and skilfully, raised her head, arranging the pillows.

"Strike me silly," he added, with a quite unprofessional dash of feeling, "if

I don't make out a beastly unanswerable case against that slippery young scoundrel downstairs!"

CHAPTER VIII

ALONG the top of the wall, where the shadow cast by the houses ended, Marquis, the piebald cat, lay outstretched in the clear mid-May sunshine. He favoured this position because from it he commanded an uninterrupted view not only of his own back-yard, but of that of the retired oil-and-colourman next door, where it was always possible interesting developments might take place in connection with the fancy rabbits. The weight of summer had not yet descended upon London. The foliage of the trees and creepers still showed a virginal freshness of green as against the soot-encrusted stems and branches. And the atmosphere was light, elevating alike to animal and

mental spirits, permeated with a certain gaiety and hope. This affected Marquis, making him skittishly mischievous, on the alert to participate in any little flourish which might be about.

The only flourish immediately presenting itself, however, took the but moderately exciting form of Mrs. Shoppen hanging out the Miss Poveys' fortnight's laundry to dry. Where the clothes-line sagged between the posts, her long, lean arms—bare, since the sleeves of her scarlet and buff cotton blouse were rolled up to the shoulder—easily reached to peg out the sheets, tablecloths, towels, and articles of wearing apparel. But where the line rose at the posts some stretching and tiptoeing became necessary. Mrs. Shoppen had therefore armed herself with a Windsor chair, upon which she mounted at intervals. From this pedestal she, like

Marquis, commanded an excellent view of both yards, and could, moreover, indulge in conversation with Gladys Em'ly, the Chidcock domestic, who—plump and blousy—was this morning engaged in like occupation to herself.

The women, each working across from the post at the far side of her own drying-ground, arrived simultaneously within a few feet of the dividing wall. There each, mounting her Windsor chair and balancing her half-emptied washing-basket on the top of the wall, stood shaking out moist garments with much apparent earnestness while holding converse.

"I don't believe I'm going to put up with my two beyond the end of the quarter, Mrs. Shoppen," Gladys Em'ly remarked, in rich Cockney accents innocent of aspirates.

The May wind, sweet even here amid

the slummy reek of North-East London back premises, blew wisps and strands of her foxy-coloured hair into her eyes, and made the Chidcock nether under-garment she held in her red hands dance a positively abandoned hornpipe.

"We've heard as much before now, Gladys Em'ly, and nothing's come of it yet," Mrs. Shoppen replied. At the moment she carried a wooden clothes-peg, cigar-fashion, in her mouth, which rendered articulation difficult.

"Ah! but it's going to this time, Mrs. Shoppen," the other asserted. "You just see if it don't. Our old man's grown too aggravating for anything these last few months. If it hand't been for pity for the missis I'd have given warning ten times over. But I'm too good-natured, Mrs. Shoppen, that's what I am. Was born that way somehow, always studying oth-

ers more than myself ever since I was ever such a little kiddie. And so I haven't had the conscience to leave the pore thing to contend with that tearing old lion and unicorn all by herself. Yes, I'm too good-hearted, I am. It makes me stand in my own light. But there, don't talk to me; I know, and pore thing, she knows it too—there isn't another girl breathing as 'ud put up with the place for so much as a week!"

Mrs. Shoppen, scenting interesting private revelations, removed the head of the clothes-peg from between her remaining teeth.

"Why, what's wrong with him now? Is he any different to what he always was?"

"Not so much different, as more so," Gladys Em'ly returned. "Ever since he got that pore young feller, Willy Evans,

put away, he's been fit to bust hisself with conceit—goes on to the missis as if he'd all Scotland Yard in his waistcoat pocket."

Mrs. Shoppen nearly lost her footing on the polished wooden seat of the chair while grasping at the corner of a wildly gambolling sheet.

"He got Willy Evans put away?" she repeated, with a strong emphasis upon the pronoun.

"Sakes alive, you'll be over, Mrs. Shoppen, as sure as sure, if you go jumping like that! Now did ever anybody see anything to match that cat! Shoo, Marky—get along!" and she laughed, showing a double range of strong, white teeth, and clapping her thick, red hands vigorously. "Shoo, will you! Less than half a minute more and he'd have had his claws clean through that sheet. Your linen's getting

pretty tender. I think so every time you hang it out. But do you mean to tell me you never knew our old man was at the bottom of showing Willy Evans up?"

"No, and I don't believe the Miss Poveys do either," the perfidious Shoppen replied, a positive lust of gossip in her long, equine countenance; "or they'd been even more set on letting the house and moving into apartments in another neighbourhood than they are. Of course the house is disgraced," she continued judicially. "Many of my friends have said to me, 'After what's occurred, Mrs. Shoppen, for certain you're not going near that place any more. It's lowering yourself.' But I'm like you, Gladys Em'ly—I'm too good-natured."

She sighed, reflectively fixing the hem of the errant sheet to the clothes-line with an additional peg.

"Yes, it does stand in anybody's way to have feelings," the other declared. "But I have 'em, and that's what made me so mad with our old man when he put the police on to the pore young fellow. He'd got some notion into his head about bombs and all that sort of foreign ridiculousness, and worked hisself up into an awful stew, or pretended to. Why, there was nights and nights when the missis was terrified to go to bed lest she should be picking up bits of herself all over the front grass before morning. Nobody was ever more taken aback than he was when the tecs found that silver and jewellery at your place. The way he carried on about it afterward! I could have punched him —I was so sick of it all—I could!"

The shadow cast by the houses had shortened, and sunshine covered the young woman's touzled head, ruddy face

and coarsely opulent figure, as she stood, in her stringy blue cotton gown and all-round drab kitchen apron, uplifted among the flapping, curvetting linen, her hands planted upon her large hips.

"I half believe that's the main reason why I really am leaving this time, Mrs. Shoppen," she added. "For I don't hold with hunting anybody down, whatever tricks they've been at. Live and let live's what I say. And Willy Evans was an affectionate-natured young feller—there's no denying that. It makes me awfully blue at times to picture him wearing that 'orrible prison uniform, shut away behind prison walls from everybody and everythink; it gives you a sort of suffocating feeling in your throat. As soon as I saw what our old holy blazes was up to I did try to warn the pore feller; but your Miss Miranda was always flicketting

around after him, so that I never got the chance, though I wore myself to a perfect shadder popping about. But there now, don't you go running off with the notion I'm wearing the willow for Willy Evans, Mrs. Shoppen, because I ain't. I'm well aware I wasn't the only one. There was plenty of others about. Why, you could feel, in half a minute, his arm was never more at home than when it got squeezing round a girl's waist! But then I'm not one for spurning pleasure because it's shared, Mrs. Shoppen. Most good-looking chaps are like that. You'd best take 'em as you find 'em, and not ask too many questions. For myself, now, I was never too proud, perticularly of a Sunday night out on the balcony, when he'd finished his hymn-singing and lit up his cigarette, and your two old goodies had trundled off to

bed, to have a bit of fun with the pore young feller and give him a kiss."

Gladys Em'ly's ample bosom rose and fell convulsively, and she rubbed her foxy-coloured hair out of her eyes.

"Yes, he'd a wonderful taking tongue with him, and no mistake. He could play the pianner, as you may say, on any woman's heart. Some chaps are like that; but they're not the sort that ever comes to much good. There now, Mrs. Shoppen, I've hung out all my wash, and there's one of your old girls pantomiming to you to go indoors, from the staircase window," she said.

CHAPTER IX

MISS MIRANDA had, in fact, beckoned from the window; for Miss Povey was out marketing, and some one knocked at the front door, and Miss Miranda had not the nerve to go downstairs and answer it. Of all things she feared the sound of the knocker. Hearing it, she wanted to stop her ears, and get away, anywhere, out of the range of the stroke of it. It agitated her, beating upon her brain, and awakening to active pain the passive, dull ache she always carried about with her—the ache of a great deception, a great sorrow sustained and ever remembered, yet never mentioned in obedience to the Povey code of good manners.

After weeks of mental and physical collapse, Miss Miranda had crept back to comparatively good health again; for the human body, when essentially sound, takes a rather cruel lot of killing. But some spring in the complex machinery of her bravely idealist nature had snapped under the shock of that deception; and, though the body might continue to trot, it looked as though the mental and emotional machinery would never work quite freely or steadily again.

She had been too ill to give evidence at Willy Evans's trial, so that through the rough ordeal of the witness-box the elder Miss Povey had passed alone. And even now, barring the bare fact of the young man's conviction, Miss Miranda knew nothing. What use, indeed, was it to know? That which had been, had been. That which now was, just was. Cogni-

zance of detail, and of the how and why of it all, could make no difference, no alteration in the black present, following on the splendid promise of the past. Therefore Miss Miranda asked no questions, invited no communications; simply filling in the grave of the whole Willy Evans episode, and of her own youth and happiness likewise, setting up neither head- or foot-stone to mark the site of that most tragic burial. As spring drew onward into summer her bodily health returned to her, so that she went about her routine of daily work as before. But her imagination and her heart remained numb and withered. Idealism had received too vital a hurt, and the play-spirit was dead in her. Nor did she ask that it should be otherwise, as yet. She accepted that numbed and withered condition uncomplainingly, almost welcoming it. For

she had become self-distrustful and timid, losing touch not only with normal conditions and the normal outlook, but with her own nature, and the vivid inner-life which had given the touch of originality to her character and mentality. Now she left the house as seldom as possible, dreading not only the noise and publicity of the streets, but the demand made upon her mind and feelings by the strong drama of them. She feared the endless procession of strange faces, glad, eager, purposeless, foolish, wretched, as the case might be; feared the flaming colours and pictured stories of the posters, the appeal and suggestion of the house and shop fronts—feared even the beauty of trees, and flowers, and green grass, of cloud and sunshine, and the uplifting immensity of the clear sky. She had no energy, no sufficient detachment left, with which to

interpret or answer the living speech of these things. They were too much for her, and so she hid herself within the familiar shabbiness of 4, Talavera Crescent, as some small wounded creature within the familiar obscurity of its poor little hole.

But to-day, somehow, she felt less fearful of outside influence. The frank May-wind, blowing through the dreary house, tossing the meagre foliage of the stunted elms in front, and joking openly with the prancing laundry in the back-yard, gave her a word of encouragement in passing, making her look forth with a dawning pleasure of seeing in her pretty, tired eyes. Marquis sporting on the top of the wall, the two women moving to and fro in the fine breadth of sunlight, pigeons circling round the church spire which cut so enchantingly into the blue; even the roar of the thoroughfare and clang-

ing bell of the trams, awakened in her a certain sense of interest in the life of London out of doors.

But then came the harsh summons of the door knocker, beating upon her brain, compelling definite remembrance of the great deception, reviving all her shrinking and her fears. It was as though the earth of the filled-in grave began to stir a little, causing her agonising doubt lest she had buried things not yet altogether dead. Did they turn in their grave? Bound in grave-clothes, would they push up through the overlying earth, and, rising, confront her, racking her with clear knowledge of all that had happened, and thus wrecking the numbness of feeling which mercifully had stood her in the place of peace?

For once Miss Miranda consciously rebelled, her whole being focussed to a

cry of protest. For she couldn't go through it at all again. She couldn't, she couldn't! Indeed, it hurt too much!

Yet there was no getting away from the sound of the knocker. She had to listen, standing brush and duster in hand by the old wicker chair at the stair-head.

At last Mrs. Shoppen clattered the length of the entry and opened the front door. There followed the sound of a man's voice. And Miss Miranda dropped brush and duster, and laid hold of the bannister-rail to steady herself, for she knew the voice though she could not put a name to it, and it made the earth filling in that grave stir more dreadfully. First it appeared questioning, then authoritative, then milder in tone and explanatory, feminine accents mingling with it, all the while, not without a certain shrillness. After a long, long while, as it seemed to

Miss Miranda tremblingly, listening, the door shut quite quietly, and Mrs. Shoppen clattered back along the entry. Now her footsteps came creaking upstairs, accompanied by Marquis, the cat, galloping, scrambling, with queer, chirruping cries and the thudding of four quick, hard little feet.

"Anybody might have knocked me down with a feather when I set eyes on him," the charwoman panted, her 'bushorse countenance moving upward through the dimness at the turn of the stairs into the dusty sunlight above. "I felt as if I should sink right through the floor I was so upset. I must have turned colour badly, for he seemed quite struck, and said his business was nothing of an annoying character."

"But who was it—who?" Miss Miranda almost sobbed.

"Why, I'm just telling you, Miss Miranda, if you will only let me get my breath. Toiling up to the top of the house, too, after such a shock! As I was saying, it was one of the two detectives—the civilest-spoken one with the black beard—who was here the night, you remember, that Evans was took—the black-bearded one——"

"Yes, Mrs. Shoppen, yes. I remember quite well—you needn't——" Miss Miranda faltered. "Is he gone yet?"

"Well, if he is, it's only due to my setting my own feelings on one side and speaking up plain to him," the other declared, severely self-righteous. "I'd all the trouble in life to keep him out, for he was most pressing to see one or other of you; and it was all I could do to put him off by telling him what a poor, ailing creature you'd been for months and

months, Miss Miranda, and that Miss Povey was out. And it takes a lot of nerve to reason with the police like that. Why, my inside's all of a shake like a half-set jelly yet. I doubt if I shall touch a mouthful of food the rest of to-day, I'm so turned over like. But, there, I did it out of kindness to you, Miss Miranda. I said to myself, 'She'd never care for him to see how badly she's broken up,' and so I put my own feelings on one side and reasoned with him. I suppose I haven't gone and done wrong, now?"

"Oh no," Miss Miranda said humbly. "It was very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Shoppen. You did quite right."

"I am glad to have you say so, for it's not always any one pleases people even when trying your utmost."

"But, but," Miss Miranda continued, ignoring the dab, "what was it he came

for, Mrs. Shoppen? What did he want?"

"Why, if that isn't just what I've been striving to get breath all this time to tell you, Miss Miranda!" the woman returned, with asperity. "As I was saying, he did seem very doubtful about stating his business at first. But I put it to him it was not the only time he and me had met." Here the 'bus-horse bridled. "Also that, though much had passed in this house I couldn't and didn't hold with, I was still here, as you may say permanent, and was quite acquainted with you and Miss Povey's private affairs, and accustomed to carry messages and all that——"

"Yes, so you are, Mrs. Shoppen—yes?" Miss Miranda repeated, her eyes fixed on the charwoman's apron, beneath which the latter held some object which made the apron poke out oddly in front.

"And that's what I told him, and so got what he was after out of him at last. So he asked me to present his compliments and to give you this." She produced a small, square, brown-paper parcel from under the projecting apron. "And he was most particular I should deliver it to you direct—'Not to the Miss Povey as gave evidence at the trial, but the little one in whose room we'——"

"I understand, Mrs. Shoppen; you—you needn't——"

"I was only giving the message as he give it to me. Am I to tell you the rest?"

Silently Miss Miranda bowed her head in acquiescence.

"Well, then, he said you'd know about the contents of the parcel. The police had found no owner for it as for the rest of all those burgled goods——" She paused with a dramatic gasp. "And he went on

that he was very sorry to hear of your illness and hoped you'd soon be in better health—which I told him didn't seem likely—and that he believed you would be glad to have this back."

Miss Miranda's work-worn hands closed tremblingly upon the brown-paper parcel; but at the touch of it a certain change came over her.

"Thank you. That will do, Mrs. Shoppen," she said, with something of her old simple dignity. "I believe I know what this contains, and I am much obliged to you; but there is the linen downstairs to see to, so I will not trouble you to wait."

And she went quickly across the landing into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her and turning the key in the lock.

"Well, in all my born days if I ever did!" the perfidious discomforted one ex-

claimed. "What in reason's come over her to turn so standoffish and haughty as all that? And I wanting to know what it was the police had brought her back. Talk of Mr. Chidcock next door being enough to arrytate a saint; well, I'm sure we could match him to a tick in this house. She has grown secretive and unreasonable, pore Miss Miranda 'as!"

Meanwhile, Miss Miranda, in the solitude of her dingy, sunny bedroom, had untied the string of the parcel, taken out the discoloured blue-plush box, and set it in its old place on the top of the chest of drawers. She stood before it, her head bowed, her hands resting on either side of it upon the dark polished surface of the wood. But she made no attempt to open it.

The wind, coming in at the window, fluttered the ends of the frayed blue rib-

bons of the box, and sent the piece of brown paper whirling across the floor. Marquis, a piebald streak, darting from under the washing-stand, sprang upon the paper, flinging it high in the air, valsing with, pummelling, rolling upon it, his yellow-green eyes wild, his tail stiff as a bottle-brush. But Miss Miranda took no notice of his gyrations. Her forehead sank down between her hands against the bevelled edge of the top of the chest of drawers, and her whole body was shaken with dry sobs which tore at her throat and her bosom.

"Oh, what's the good? what's the good?" she wailed. "It was kindly meant, but it only brings back the misery of all I have lost. For it wasn't the little ship, as I pretended in my foolishness, not the pretty little play-ship, but Willy—ah, Willy!—Willy Evans I'd given my poor,

silly, trusting old maid's heart to, and worshipped and loved."

A great fit of weeping took her, convulsing her from head to foot; but after the storm of tears came a sense of restoration and relief. She was no longer numb and insensitive, frightened at the drama of living and of life. The machinery had begun to work. Her idealism reawake. She raised herself, inhaled the clean summer air, felt the sunshine warm upon her shoulders and her breast; while the cat, serious, almost wistful, its diabolic humour passed, reared up on its hind legs, pushing its hard, adder-shaped head into her open hand.

"And I love him still," Miss Miranda said softly; "better than ever, and without any foolishness; not the poor, weak boy that went astray and stole and lied, but the real Willy, with the beautiful words

and beautiful thoughts, who felt for the working people and wanted to give himself to set wrong and cruel things right. For that was the real Willy—the one who God made and God meant, I can never, never doubt about that."

She bathed her face with cold water, stroked the cat, stepped out on to the landing, and, picking up duster and brush, went on with her house-work.

"There's always another side to all that happens," she said; "and what a narrow, half-baked, puny-hearted stick of a thing I should have grown into if I had never had Willy to love. I ought to be very thankful for that. And then I've got Aunt. She's been lovely to me right through, and I've been ever so selfish and pokey; now I am going to brisk up. I'll get a new card, and put it in the fanlight over the door, with 'Apartments to Let.'

We might find some nice young lady typist or clerk, and that would bring in a little more and be a change and company for Aunt. And then some day, later, if he saw that card perhaps—perhaps—who can tell?—he might come back. But it's best not to look forward or count on anything of like sort—only if he did——"

Thus is the mind of the idealist. And being thus, who shall dare pronounce whether the idealist is the sorriest dupe of determined delusion, or the happy possessor of profoundest truth?

In honesty, it must be conceded, however, that there are limits to even Miss Miranda Povey's faith and hope. A nice young lady typist is duly installed in the second-floor front of 4, Talavera Crescent, board-residence, thirteen-and-six a week—"for who," as Mrs. Shoppen remarked over the backyard wall to Gladys

Em'ly, when hanging out the laundry, "could have the conscience to ask full terms after what has passed?" The typist is very genteel, and regales her landladies with information regarding her sentimental complications in respect of the ginger-haired correspondence-clerk to a firm of cycle manufacturers in Bow Road, with whom she walks out. But Miss Miranda, though she listens with deep interest to these communications and trots cheerfully from morning to night, has never yet looked upon the golden galleon, or so much as lifted the lid of the shabby blue-plush box in which the wreckage of it, and of her middle-aged maiden romance, alike lie hid.